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Putting Everything on the Blackboard for Teacher Candidate

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Abstract

This article represents the results of action research in the implementation of a web-based communication system in teacher education. The author informally recounts his successful experiment using the Blackboard system to facilitate communication with all of the program's teacher candidates. Qualitative feedback data collected from student users of the system are featured along with responses from the author, leading to continuous improvements to the site based on the data.

If your teacher education unit has the difficulties the one I worked in used to have in keeping students informed, you might be able to use an electronic instructional management system, perhaps already at your disposal, to open up a direct pathway of communication. This article describes how one university used the Blackboard Inc. Instructional Management System to better communicate with and serve teacher candidates. I do not claim to be the first to ever use Blackboard in this way; however, the idea did emerge organically and independently on our campus.

In our teacher education program we were always posting signs trying to get the word out about this or that to our future teachers and then telling one or two students to "tell your friends." There are always things popping up that you wish all of your students knew about, such as PRAXIS preparation workshops, changes to certification programs, or the impending last day to sign up for whatever. Our certification office kept a large calendar in the hallway with events and deadlines squeezed into little day squares. Sometimes we kept our postings current, sometimes not. And students always seemed to come asking about an event or deadline a day too late. We always had the best of intentions about spreading the word, sending out memos, and putting up posters, but all too often the word did not get spread in any meaningful way. Valuable information did not get forwarded to the people who could have benefited from it most, and we were to blame.

One day during a faculty meeting in the Fall of 2002, an idea popped into my head. Why not use the Blackboard (Bb) instructional management system we already have in place to keep our teacher candidates informed about upcoming events and deadlines? I asked my department head and dean about the idea, and within a couple of days we had everyone linked in electronic communication like never before.

If you are not familiar with Bb, it is a computer-based instructional management system that allows an educational provider to create courses on line and provide easy access to users. It makes it fairly easy for an instructor to post documents, designate web links, send email, post announcements, and provide interactive online discussions for students in their classes. Blackboard was founded in 1997 and is currently used by more than 2,800 institutions both for facilitating totally web-based instruction and as a supplemental electronic environment for courses that meet face to face. You may learn more on the Bb web site. Colleges and universities use several similar systems, such as Web CT. (This system happens to be what my university uses, and I am in no way connected with or beholden to Blackboard, Inc.)

The first step was to create a “class” on Bb called Teacher Candidates. I contacted our campus Bb administrator who easily created the course with me as instructor of record. Of course, I did not intend for this to become an actual course, but rather a way to interact on line with all of our students in certification programs. Next, I got a list of our teacher candidates and added them to the course. I also added all of the related faculty and staff as “instructors” so that everyone could post announcements or use the email feature of the system to instantly contact all teacher candidates. Initially, this Bb site served about 250 students, staff, and faculty. Immediately, each time our students logged into Bb to check in for any actual class they were enrolled in, they also got the latest information on the Teacher Candidates site. And all faculty and staff in our departments could stay up to date on announcements, schedule changes, upcoming events, etc.

These students remain enrolled in the site until they graduate, change academic programs, or leave the university. It takes a little time each term to update the list. Some additions and deletions are on-going, but only the initial building of the Bb list is very time consuming. Over several quarters the Bb site has grown to serve over 500 people through the adding of graduate students, other staff and faculty, and potential teacher candidates who have requested to get on the list. We have even developed a second Bb site just for pre-teacher candidates—students enrolled in our introductory courses who have not yet been admitted into an actual teacher education program. They sometimes need certain information that does not concern the students already admitted as teacher candidates yet do not need to be overloaded with information.

Our whole teacher education unit has been touched in subtle ways through this information-sharing instrument. Students, faculty, and staff alike have all benefited. The site has had over 10,000 hits. And the system can give us the details of who checked in and how many times. It can even tell us which sections of the site they looked in. We utilize the system to assign field placements for school observations. We publicize changes in class times and days during advising so everyone knows when they need to know. In short, we all stay informed without annoying the whole university with mass emails. Bb serves as a bulletin board that reaches out to those who need the bulletins. The following are selected examples of student feedback received over the last two school years through the discussion board feature of the Bb system that have helped reassure us and guide us in making improvements to the system.

“I think everything is great! I’ve been kept up to date on everything!”

“I find Bb very useful and convenient because I am a commuting, non-traditional student.” *(Then they started to find some room for improvement.)*

“I think it is a wealth of information . . . I don’t know that it is possible, but some study advice for comp tests would be great . . .” *(We posted the rubric used to assess comps and some review information.)*

“I would like to be updated on teacher job fairs or workshops that may be helpful to us.” *(We began posting information from the regional service center for public schools.)*

“Some websites for the PRAXIS II would be nice also.” *(We posted some study materials and are still looking for good websites to post.)*

“More discussion questions for teaching program students would be nice. Hearing other students’ experiences would help us to stay encouraged.” *(We have tried on-going discussions about field experience--with only limited participation.)*

“I would love to become more involved in educational organizations both on and off campus. I need something like this in my portfolio and just want to meet more teachers!” *(We added links to various professional education organizations and even got a local student-based chapter of APEL going.)*

“One thing I would be interested in is more detail about the portfolio—what types of pieces we put in it and how it all comes together?”

“I agree about the portfolio information. I am a senior and still not clear about what exactly is supposed to be in my portfolio. That is the one thing that should be addressed more often and more clearly. “

“I find Bb effective for communication purposes for teacher candidates. I would like more information on how to complete our portfolios, seeing that we do not have a class on it. We are just told to complete a portfolio, here are the standards, do it . . .” *(Boy, did we get the message about portfolios. We posted links to example teacher portfolios, clarified the INTASC standards we use to organize the portfolios with more online information, and began to identify key elements from each course in our teacher education sequence that should be retained for inclusion in the portfolio. This process helped us to understand that we still have a long way to go toward making portfolio assessment of teacher candidates truly valid and reliable.)*

“I have found Bb to be very useful. I especially enjoy the handouts being posted on Bb. The external links have also been useful. I have been able to beg preparing for the PRAXIS II from the external links. I don’t see how it could be improved.”

Continuous improvement does have its rewards! In conclusion, it was not the computer system itself that helped our unit increase our efficiency as much as it was the way in which we utilized it. Many institutions have Web CT or some other system that could be used in the same way to increase student satisfaction and improve communication all around. And someone inside the teacher education unit will have to step up and take the time to build the system into something useful. Once built, you will be amazed how quickly it will become part of daily life. Your teacher candidates will check it like email. Then you can stop buying thumbtacks for the bulletin board. Try it. You'll see.